

Applying sport psychology to business

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Abstract

There has been a substantial increase in the application of sport psychology theory and practice in business settings in recent years. This paper outlines points of intersection and divergence between sport and business, and provides examples from sport that are of use in business settings. This paper also draws upon Orlick's 2008 evidence-based model of excellence, as a vehicle for illustrating key skills associated with peak performance across a variety of high-stress domains including sport, music, and medicine. We posit that this model can be applied to improving performance in the corporate world. The Wheel of Excellence model incorporates seven key elements, with Focus as the hub, in addition to Commitment, Mental Readiness, Positive Images, Confidence, Distraction Control, and Ongoing Learning. Given the close parallels between business and sport psychology, it is anticipated that increasing attention will be devoted to their integration and application crossover in the future.

Applying sport psychology to business

Sport psychologists are increasingly turning their attention to the business world, investigating how the principles for promoting athletic excellence can be transferred effectively to those engaged in business endeavours. The past decade in particular has seen a significant increase in the transfer of sport psychology practice to business settings, as evidenced by a huge surge in publications on the subject (e.g., Bull, 2006; Foster, 2008; Gallwey, 2001; Gordon, 2007; Jones & Moorehouse, 2007; Loehr & Schwartz, 2001a, 2001b; Schalkwyk, 2004).

In the 1970's Timothy Gallwey produced a seminal, and now classic, book in the field of sport psychology when he wrote *The Inner Game of Tennis* (Gallwey, 1974). Gallwey then turned his attention to other sports such as golf and skiing (Gallwey 1997, 1998), as well as to music performance (Green & Gallwey, 1986). Perhaps it was only fitting and inevitable that he eventually applied his expertise to business when he wrote *The Inner Game of Work*, published in 2001, which has since received wide acclaim among coaching psychologists.

Others of note who have made a transition from athletic coaching to business consultancy are highlighted in the latest edition of a leading introductory level textbook on sport psychology (Weinberg & Gould, 2007). Weinberg and Gould observed, however, that the typical request to legendary basketball coaches such as Pat Riley and Phil Jackson is to give motivational talks rather than to provide ongoing consulting support for businesses. Such activities feed the popular misconception that sport psychology is primarily about enhancing motivation. In fact motivational enhancement actually plays a relatively small role in applied sport psychology compared to the time spent developing, for example, effective coping strategies and performance routines.

By the same token, the corporate world often uses sport as an analogy for the competitive environment in which most businesses operate. Perhaps this is one reason why sport psychologists have shown a tendency to eventually depart the relatively poorly-paid world of sport consulting to “cash in” their skills in the boardrooms of the nation where performance improvements can translate into millions of dollars. This metaphorical trading-in of the tracksuit for a pinstripe has become particularly vogue over the past decade (see Terry, 2008). One world-renowned sport psychologist has likened such a switch to a Robin Hood ethos, taking from the corporate rich to be able to afford to service the (relatively) poor athletes.

Given the highly competitive, results-driven nature of the higher echelons of the sport and business worlds, the potential for crossover appears relatively obvious. There are, however, advantages in looking at specifics. In chronicling his very successful transition from sport psychologist to business consultant, Jones (2002) highlighted five characteristics that he found were common to both domains. According to Jones, athletes and business executives are equally concerned with the processes of stress management;, leadership, high-performing teams, one-to-one coaching; and organisational issues.

In a recent review of sport psychology interventions in business, Gordon (2007) highlighted other key skills that have been shown to transfer effectively to the business world. These included goal setting, mental rehearsal and imagery, performance rituals and routines, mood and confidence-boosting self-talk strategies, optimism training, and rational-emotive and cognitive-behavioural therapies. Similarly, Lloyd and Foster (2006) reported on five mental training skills, mental imagery, performance routines, positive self-talk, activation control, and attention and focus control, that they have implemented successfully in business settings. Lloyd and

Foster noted that these techniques were perceived to have high face validity, which promoted their acceptance by clients in the business sector.

The practice and evidence base of sport psychology has been very well documented elsewhere (e.g., Weinberg & Gould, 2007) and so it is not our intent to address that matter in detail here, other than to point out that those wishing to know more about the specifics of sport psychology have ample resources readily at their disposal.

Organisations such as the Association of Applied Sport Psychology (AASP), the Australian Psychological Society's (APS) College of Sport Psychologists, the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Division of Sport and Exercise, the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES), and Division 47 of the American Psychological Association (APA) can be readily accessed via the internet; and there are also a very wide range of specialist journals (e.g., *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, and *The Sport Psychologist*) and academic texts on the subject (e.g., Andersen, 2000; Morris & Summers, 2004; Weinberg & Gould, 2007; Williams, 2006).

Instead, our purpose in this article is to highlight and elaborate upon points of intersection and divergence between the psychology of peak performance in the worlds of sport and business. In particular, we will draw upon the *Wheel of Excellence*, an evidence-based model frequently applied to sport and other performance settings. The model was developed by Terry Orlick, a world-renowned leader in the field of applied sport psychology, mental training, and excellence. Orlick has also served as president of the International Society for Mental Training and Excellence (ISMTE), an organization that covers a wide variety of performance

domains, including sport, music and the performing arts, medicine, business, aeronautics, the military, and other high stress occupations.

Points of Intersection Between Sport and Business

Sport examples used in the corporate world provide not only a potential source of inspiration, but also serve to normalize the conditions and challenges that a business client may face. If clients feel more like athletes who are required to perform in a harsh, competitive environment then they may be more open to exploring and developing their capacities to achieve their full potential. Hence, the phrase “corporate athlete”, a term coined by Loehr and Schwartz (2001b), becomes particularly apt in this context. It may help business executives to better understand that if champion athletes face self-doubt in the face of pressure situations – indeed at the highest levels of competition their anxiety is often very acute – then self-doubt must come with the territory of trying to achieve excellence. A key difference may be that champions in sport have worked hard for many years to develop significant reservoirs of psychological strengths and coping strategies from which to draw upon to help overcome doubts and to compensate for weaknesses. Promoting an appreciation that success does not usually come easy to champion athletes may help to encourage business clients to adopt similar longer-term developmental goals and to show the same patience and persistence in the face of adversity.

In general terms, the primary objective for clients in business and sport is to control what they can, to accept what they cannot change, and to know the difference between the two. Hence the mantra of *controlling the controllables* is almost universal among sport psychologists (e.g., Bull, 2006; Gordon, 2007). A common part of the consulting process in sport is to identify and strengthen what is controllable,

such as activation levels, concentration, and emotions, and to develop strategies to reduce concerns about things outside of personal control, such as teammates, opponents, officials, the weather or the crowd.

In both business and sport consulting, a primary purpose is to enhance performance, hence the colloquial term “stretch” rather than “shrink”. In other words, the aim is to stretch the capacities of clients rather than to shrink their problems. From a Seligman-esque perspective, as noted recently by Gordon, “the role of a performance psychologist is helping to move a client from 0 to + 5 on a performance scale rather than from -5 to 0.” (Terry, 2008, p. 9).

Another point of intersection between performance psychology in sport and in business is that both draw from the same well in terms of interviewing and consulting tools (e.g., motivational interviewing, appreciative inquiry, solution-focused approaches). For example, a standard initial interview with an athlete client would often include a review of previous performance patterns – identifying the pre-performance mindset, cognitions, behaviours and emotional responses associated with best compared to worst performances – and building routines for future performances on that basis (Orlick, 1986). This strategy can be applied to a business setting whereby a client might be asked to reflect back on previous occasions when they felt on top of their game, when they successfully handled major challenges, when they were particularly effective, to develop a personal profile of performance to be drawn upon and exploited for future occasions.

Points of Divergence Between Sport and Business

As well as commonalities, there are also major distinctions between sport and business pursuits. Firstly, there are usually immediately observable performance

indicators in the sporting arena. Immediate feedback about being on track mentally and physically is both part of the beauty and the pressure of sport, whereas in business there can often be a substantial time lag before results are confirmed and disseminated. In many cases in the business world, the pressure to perform and the level of scrutiny is more diffused over time – quarterly or annual reviews compared to play-by-play or game-by-game reviews – even though the financial stakes in business may be substantially higher than in sport. Hence, relative to the typical sport situation, the typical business environment may be viewed as more of a marathon than a sprint (or, as Jim Loehr refers to the business world, a *series* of sprints). It also means that, unlike sport, it may be possible to fly below the radar in business environments for substantial periods of time before performance decrements or increments become apparent, thus presenting a need for somewhat different intervention strategies.

Secondly, compared to business environments, the process of goal-setting is more straightforward in the sports arena. In business, there may be a wider range of more complex goals, some of which may even conflict (e.g., between the Marketing and the Research and Development departments). While it might seem apparent that the bottom line, profitability, is the overall criterion of performance in business, the goal posts may shift if stakeholders and board members establish other criteria for success. In business, therefore, there is a requirement for greater clarification of missions, goals, and objectives; along with the development of strategies designed to meet them.

Another distinction between sport and business involves understanding the rules of the game clearly. In sport, the rules are typically clear and well established, although perhaps not always consistently enforced. In business, the rules of

engagement are often unclear and far from transparent, and may change frequently depending upon who is sitting on the board. This can create confusion when outlining and establishing priorities. Furthermore, the career span of an athlete is usually far shorter than most business careers, meaning that the pressure to perform consistently at a high level is intensified. An advantage in business is that there is always recourse for redemption, whereas in sport results are irrevocable. Finally, the training versus performance ratio is vastly different in the two domains. Typically, the time that athletes spend training is far greater than the time spent performing in competition, whereas in business the reverse is true. This brings with it a somewhat different dynamic that may necessitate varied approaches to performance enhancement.

A Model for Performance Excellence in Sport and Business

The Wheel of Excellence (Orlick, 2008; see Figure 1) is presented here as a vehicle for illustrating how a performance psychology model might be transferred from the sport world and applied to the business world. The model has undergone much evolution, commencing with the influential work of Orlick and Partington (1988), and subsequently being revised as relevant research evidence has mounted from a variety of performance domains (Orlick, 1992, 1996, 2008). The wheel encompasses those characteristics that are consistently reported to be associated with peak performance (Krane & Williams, 2006). Importantly, all of them are within the individual's personal control. The basic seven elements of the wheel have remained the same throughout its evolution, as has the analogy that if equal attention to all parts of the wheel is not achieved, then the result is a wobbly wheel that will tend to roll off course. In human terms, this suggests that uneven, or wobbly, personal development leads to getting off easily sidetracked or losing focus about central objectives.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Focus

“A person who aims at nothing is sure to hit it” (Anonymous).

Central to all performance is the capacity to focus. As the hub of the wheel, this is both the metaphorical bull’s eye for which all those in pursuit of excellence should aim, and the central characteristic around which all the other components of the wheel revolve and are designed to enhance. Focus encompasses the skill of concentration, which can be seen as the ability to focus only on what is relevant and to stay focused for the duration of a task; plus the ability to shift focus as required by the task or changing conditions. Common sport expressions for this are “keep your eye on the ball”, “stay in the moment”, “be in the here and now” and “one point at a time” or, as applied by a leading heart surgeon, “one stitch at a time”. Donald Trump has reportedly mentioned that one of the things he learned most about his repeated financial troubles was the need to keep his eye on the ball.

When focus drifts from the process to the outcome, or to what others think, or to what competitors are doing, or you allow yourself to become intimidated by how strong and confident others appear, that is when you start to make mistakes or exercise poor judgement that leads to bad decisions. For example, a CEO may be preoccupied with status comparisons with rivals at other companies or with achieving financial results that exceed expectations, to the point of neglecting relationships with his/her own board or with other stakeholders. This can be seen as analogous to dropping the proverbial ball. Even worse, a CEO may be vulnerable to overlooking

unethical business practices – deciding that the end justifies the means – as in the case of Oracle CEO Larry Ellison in the early 1990's.

In our overstimulated society, with various competing demands for our attention, many people engage in excessive multi-tasking. Indeed, many people are very proud of their ability to multi-task. However, it is well understood in the sporting arena that cluttering the mind with several plays at once creates a loss of focus and thereby disrupts performance (e.g., Bond & Sargent, 2004; Kremer & Moran, 2008). This is often less well appreciated in the day-to-day business environment, although leading performance consultants such as Jim Loehr consider (2003) multi-tasking to be the number one enemy of high performance.

Without wishing to downplay the role of big picture strategic thinking, it would seem to be just as important in business as in sport to focus on one agenda item at a time, one task at a time, and so on when actually performing important tasks. Thinking too much about an impending deadline or the eventual outcome often leads to mistakes or increases anxiety that impairs best focus. Completing a victory in any sporting event, such as closing out a tennis match at championship point, is probably the most challenging time to stay focused and is often when we are most mentally and physically fatigued. The most successful athletes have very well developed performance protocols or competition plans that are designed to identify not only what behaviours are required at each juncture, but also where to focus their attention and what specific thoughts might be most productive (Bond & Sargent, 2004; Terry, 1989) .

Commitment

“Losers make promises they often break. Winners make commitments they always keep.” (Denis Waitley)

Performance excellence begins with making a choice to succeed, something that is completely within personal control. The process of establishing personal goals sets in motion a chain of decisions that may either support or detract from the overall objective. One thing that sets apart high achievers from the rest is that they not only set more challenging goals, but they are also willing and determined to put in the required effort and make the necessary sacrifices until the goals are achieved (Jones, 2002).

The importance of committing to giving 100% effort in order to achieve excellent results in sport is clear, but what may not be as apparent is the equal need for commitment to work-life balance and recovery as well. Overlooking this balance, as in the case of a sleep-deprived worker, leads to a much greater probability of illness or worse, not to mention decrements in productivity. This principle is emphasised in the corporate athlete training programs led by Loehr and Schwartz. They present optimal management of energy as a key to optimal conditioning of mind, body and spirit, which they argue contributes to maximal performance in business. Their programs cover a range of modalities for achieving such a balance that includes nutrition and physical fitness, as well as mental and spiritual development (Loehr & Schwartz, 2001a, 2001b). Planning for recovery and breaks is therefore an essential element of a high performance plan. In the words of Leonardo Da Vinci, one of history's foremost achievers of excellence, “The greatest geniuses sometimes accomplish more when they work less.”

Mental Readiness

“The mind is like a parachute – it works best when open.” (Albert Einstein)

Mental readiness involves identifying the best mindset for a particular task and developing ways to instil that mindset when required. Top performers in sport usually have well developed rituals and routines that they implement pre-event, during competition, during breaks in the action, and also post-event. They might include self-regulation strategies such as relaxation and/or energizing techniques to control activation levels, planned thought processes to manage critical moments, routines to better cope with performance errors, and mood management strategies where music often serves as a powerful mood trigger (see Terry, 2004).

Successful athletes also take care to build in recovery, both within an event and between bouts of exertion, to ensure optimal capacity. For instance, most professional tennis players include a brief recovery phase between each point, where for a few seconds they take their mind away from strategic analysis or self-talk and simply focus on slowing their breathing or towelling down. Loehr and Schwartz (2001b) suggested that executives can learn a lesson here from sport by taking time out every hour or so to roll their shoulders or engage in a little gentle stretching.

Ironically, smokers may have an edge over their non-smoking colleagues in this area because, with the exception of the cigarette, everything else about smoke breaks contributes to health and wellbeing. The process of taking regular time-outs, stretching legs and eyes, going outdoors, breathing slowly and deeply, perhaps enjoying a conversation with friends, and then returning to work feeling revived and refreshed is a performance strategy that non-smokers might consider emulating (Ievleva & Murphy, 2006).

Lloyd and Foster (2006) have highlighted the potential benefits of mental readiness in the workplace. They proposed that “The ability to quickly replicate optimal performance states could mean decreased lag time between the intention to act and initiation of behaviour” (p. 32). They go on to emphasise (a) the benefits of relaxation for employees to help manage stressful events occurring during the workday, (b) the skill of activating mental and physical energy when fatigued in order to persist in their efforts, perhaps to meet an important deadline, and (c) the use of quieting strategies, such as controlled breathing, soothing imagery or the repetition of calming words, to promote recovery from escalating stress levels, which may help to prevent employee burnout. This is an area in which there appears to be limited uptake of sport psychology strategies in the business world.

Positive Images

“Imagination is more important than knowledge.” (Albert Einstein)

There is no doubt that mental images can exert a powerful influence on physical performance, a notion supported by a substantial body of anecdotal and empirical evidence (see Feltz & Landers, 1983; Morris, Spittle, & Watt, 2005). Imagery is used for a variety of purposes in the world of sport, including the acquisition and performance of skills, to change emotional responses and cognitions, and the regulation of anxiety. Logically, all of these applications are equally relevant in the world of business.

A fundamental principle when using imagery in a systematic way is to try to create positive images of what you *want* in order to banish negative images of what you are *afraid of*. A classic example involves recreational golfers playing over water, who sometimes have to work very hard to generate a mental image of the ball clearing

the water and landing on the green, in order to overcome the alternative image of the ball splashing into the water that often haunts the average golfer's psyche. This process can be summed up in a single word – WYSIWYG – What You See Is What You Get. This principle is based on the human tendency to create in reality what is seen in the mind's eye. There will almost always be mental images present; the trick is to ensure that the correct images are generated.

Top golf psychologist Bob Rotella asserts that the key to being a successful golfer is to be able to get into an exceptionally good frame of mind and to stay there for the duration of each round, for the week of a tournament (Rotella, 2004). Maintenance of positive imagery is promoted by regularly practising imagery skills, but also by engaging in positive self-talk, affirmations, and reframing exercises. A starting point in developing this skill is to mentally review a previous peak experience/performance, and then to project the key images to a future event (see *Peak Performance Recall* in Ievleva & Stillwell, 1996).

It is important to point out that such self-talk is better phrased in positive terms. For example, referring back to the golf shot over the water, it would be better to say “hit the green” to yourself rather than “do *not* hit it into the water”, because the former invokes a positive image whereas the latter still invokes an image of the ball hitting the water, despite what is actually said.

So, in business, it is better to say “stay calm and composed” when a suggestion put forward is rejected by colleagues rather than “do not get defensive and argumentative.” It is also helpful if the inner dialogue, or self-instruction, evokes the appropriate mental image and feeling. Hence, when telling yourself to “stay calm and composed”, it is best to try to recreate the feel and image of those qualities for optimal effectiveness.

Confidence

"If you think you can, you're right; if you think you can't, you're still right."

(Henry Ford)

Unshakeable belief and high self-confidence are frequently reported to be one of the characteristics that sets high achievers apart from the rest whether in the sporting arena or in business (Jones, 2002; Krane & Williams, 2006). Indeed, self-confidence has been described as the guardian angel of sports performers (Terry, 1989). Certainly the sport psychology literature is replete with evidence of the performance benefits of high self-confidence (Woodman & Hardy, 2003). It should be noted that the term *self-confidence* used in this context can be understood as "the faith in one's ability to perform a specific task or achieve a specific goal" and this is equivalent to the concept of self-efficacy as outlined by Bandura (1997). The term confidence is preferred by Orlick because it is more immediately understood by people without a psychology background.

Comment [FoB1]: Thanks for the reference, but I prefer the more recent book that includes references to success in sports and beyond.

Unlike commitment, and for whatever reason, many might consider confidence to be somewhat less within personal control, but this not really true. For example, McNatt and colleagues have shown, via a meta-analysis of 43 studies in management settings, that interventions can boost the confidence of individuals by 25-40% (see McNatt, 2001). To help promote self-confidence, Orlick suggests six developmental steps – starting with someone *else* believing in you, progressing to thinking *maybe* you can, then acting *as if* you can (the classic "fake it 'til you make it" adage), *believing* you can, *knowing* you can, and finally *trusting you will*.

A simple text message sent by tennis legend Billie Jean King to 2008 Australian Open Champion Maria Sharapova on the eve of the championship final helped to boost the young player's confidence by putting the task of winning into

perspective (Pearce, 2008). King's words, "Champions take chances. Pressure is a privilege", summed up the need for Sharapova to accept the inevitable anxiety and to find the courage and trust in herself to cope with the occasion, which of course she did magnificently. The phrase "Pressure is a privilege" served as a great reframe that helped shift focus from what might have been an uncomfortable or even painful experience, to something much more positive and uplifting. The idea is to focus on what will go right, instead of worrying about what can go wrong, and this reflects a more optimistic outlook.

Distraction Control

"Any occurrence requiring undivided attention will be accompanied by an [equally] compelling distraction" (Hutchison's Law)

What often separates the successful from the "also-rans" is their ability to maintain focus in the face of challenges, setbacks and distractions, and to get back on track quickly if losing focus. Distractions can arise from *internal* sources, such as negative thoughts, worries or unrealistic expectations, or *external* sources, such as disruptive colleagues, delays or computer crashes. Top performers are usually well prepared to cope with distractions, perhaps because they have developed detailed refocus plans and contingencies for every eventuality via repeated "what if?" exercises or, alternatively, because they have developed the habit of applying a few simple principles to all distracting events – Accept (what has happened), Plan (an alternative response), Implement (the response). This helps them to respond more effectively to distractions without over-reacting and wasting valuable time and energy. Also, the knowledge that you have an effective response whatever comes your

way serves to increase confidence and frees you to focus on positive images of what needs to be done rather than what might go wrong.

Distraction control also involves being able to refocus, to get back on track quickly. In business, this might involve establishing contingency plans, but would also mean maintaining appropriate focus when something goes wrong. Often the temptation when an individual senses that things are going wrong or that they are losing control is to try harder, or to attempt to exercise greater control over something or someone that is not within control. This often leads to a downward spiral in performance. Just as in sport, when athletes try too hard, they tend to produce extra muscular tension in their efforts that yield progressively poorer results. Loehr cautions athletes to catch themselves when pressing too hard, and cue themselves to “try softer” instead (Loehr, 1999).

In business, it would also be important to recognize when you are getting sidetracked or preoccupied with concerns unrelated to the task at hand (office gossip, family problems, etc.). This would involve putting aside such distractions while at work using refocusing techniques (see Orlick, 1986, 2003). This is not to diminish the importance of home life or the life balance equation, but to recognise the lack of control over such issues while at the office. Clearly, if the home life issue is of sufficient gravity to require immediate attention, then it is equally important not to allow work concerns to sidetrack you from resolving the home issue. The underlying premise is to learn refocus skills, to adhere to the principle of *Be here now*.

Ongoing Learning

“An unexamined life is not worth living.” (Plato)

This component of excellence relies on a willingness on the part of individuals to learn from every experience, to develop a culture of self-monitoring and self-

reflection in order to draw out the lessons learned and to act upon them in the future. Hence, the debrief process becomes a critical developmental step on the road to excellence, and this takes on greater significance following *unsuccessful* performances compared to successful ones. In sport, such debriefs typically focus on the behaviours, thoughts and emotional responses that proved productive as well as those that proved unproductive. The aim of the process is not to dwell on mistakes made *per se* but to crystallise the lessons learned from them for future reference. This is generally seen as an important step in regaining a sense of control following a failure in sport. Ongoing learning through self-reflection is often the weakest link to the wheel of excellence, as it is time consuming and can be unpleasant following a poor performance. Ultimately, however, it is a timesaver! If we do not learn from our mistakes, we are destined to repeat them.

In their review of coaching high achievers, Jones and Spooner (2006) noted that high achievers are often hungry for critical feedback. In our own consulting work with athletes, we have found that lack of feedback from the coach is a frequent concern, and this is often especially true for the more prominent athletes on any given team. Typically, success in competitive environments is underpinned by attention to detail. Structured debriefs to identify lessons learned for future performances may prove a particularly useful learning tool for business clients (see Orlick, 1986).

Conclusion

Orlick (2008) proposes an interdependent link between each component of the wheel of excellence in that, as each is strengthened, the others also become stronger; but if any component is neglected, the others may be rendered useless. This suggests a

need to address all components of the wheel of excellence in a thorough and systematic manner.

Given the close parallels between business and sport psychology, it is surprising how, until recently, little attention has been devoted to greater integration of the two. We hope that this paper may stimulate new ideas amongst executive and business coaches and we look forward to the prospect of greater exchange and collaboration between the world of organisational coaching and the world of sports psychology in future. Such exchange can only strengthen the quality of the services we all offer to our respective coaching clients.

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Figure 1. The Wheel of Excellence (Orlick, 2008, reproduced with permission)

